

Internet Prescribing

Position Statement of the Michigan Board of Medicine

The Michigan Board of Medicine (Board) supports the growing number of physicians who use the Internet within their medical practices to improve the delivery of health care to patients. However, there are an increasing number of physicians who operate or are employed by Internet Web sites that prescribe and dispense medications for patients based solely on the completion of an online questionnaire. Based on the belief that this type of Internet prescribing constitutes substandard medical care, national medical organizations have developed policies to educate physicians regarding the appropriate use of the Internet in medical practice and to prevent this type of Internet prescribing.

In April 2002, the Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB) issued "Model Guidelines for the Appropriate Use of the Internet in Medical Practice", which states, in part: "Treatment, including issuing a prescription, based solely on an online questionnaire or consultation does not constitute an acceptable standard of care." In addition, the FSMB's guidelines provided ten specific recommendations for physicians to follow when using or incorporating the use of the Internet into their medical practices.

In 2003, the American Medical Association (AMA) issued "Policy H-120.949 Guidance for Physicians on Internet Prescribing", which states, in part: "Physicians who prescribe medications via the Internet shall establish, or have established, a valid patient-physician relationship, including, but not limited to, the following components. The physician shall: (i) obtain a reliable medical history and perform a physical examination of the patient, adequate to establish the diagnosis for which the drug is being prescribed and to identify underlying conditions and/or contraindications to the treatment recommended/provided; (ii) have sufficient dialogue with the patient regarding treatment options and the risks and benefits of treatment(s); (iii) as appropriate, follow up with the patient to assess the therapeutic outcome; (iv) maintain a contemporaneous medical record that is readily available to the patient and, subject to the patient's consent, to his or her other health care professionals; and (v) include the electronic prescription information as part of the patient medical record. Exceptions to the above criteria exist in the following specific instances: treatment provided in consultation with another physician who has an ongoing professional relationship with the patient, and who has agreed to supervise the patient's treatment, including use of any prescribed medications; and on-call or cross-coverage situations."

It is the position of the Board that prescribing medications based solely on a patient's completion of an online questionnaire, without performing a physical examination or establishing a valid patient-physician relationship, constitutes substandard medical care that places the patient's health at risk. In order to provide guidance to physicians that are currently using or plan to incorporate the use of the Internet into their medical practices, the Board has adopted the guidelines recommended by the FSMB in Model Guidelines for the Appropriate Use of the Internet in Medical Practice. These guidelines are available in their entirety at http://www.fsmb.org/pdf/2002_grpol_Use_of_Internet.pdf. Failure to adhere to these guidelines may constitute conduct that fails to meet the minimal standards of acceptable and prevailing practice and could result in disciplinary action.